

# Auto/biographical oral histories, from 'oral memoirs' to *The Life of Nate Shaw* (1948-1974)

by Shelley Trower

**Abstract:** This essay considers how a selection of early US oral history projects (1940s-1970s) served to extend written, auto/biographical traditions, but also helped break open the traditional canon and challenge generic definitions. It begins with 'oral memoirs' produced by Columbia University's Oral History Research Office (1940s-1950s), then focuses on auto/biographies by Malcolm X/Alex Haley (1965) and Nate Shaw/Theodore Rosengarten (1974). These narratives, modelled on the traditional individual autobiography or biography, represented the life of a single person; the latter two also challenged generic conventions, reflecting an early moment when US oral history began to turn from elites to previously marginalised voices. The essay analyses how co-creation of texts by interviewer and narrator prevents their final categorisation as autobiographical or biographical, and argues that Rosengarten's use of the tape recorder enables *The Life of Nate Shaw* to move furthest from literary tradition in its incorporation of orality.

**Key words:** autobiography; biography; tape recorder; black history; orality

The Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, set up by Allan Nevins in 1948, is known to be the first organisation to have systematically collected oral histories using open-reel recorders. Pioneering in its use of sound technologies to record oral interviews, the written text nevertheless dominated its work at various stages from conception to publication. In an essay describing the origins of oral history, 'Oral history: how and why it was born', first published in 1966, Nevins described how his colleagues at Columbia first set to work with 'pencil and pad', only later using 'wire recorders' and then 'early tape-recording machines'. Despite these changes in recording technologies, the product continued to be envisaged as a written version of the interview, as in the case of the first interview mentioned, with the thirty-third vice president in 1951:

'With elation the managers watched Henry Wallace record for posterity about 2,000 typed pages of reminiscences'.<sup>1</sup> The sound recording here is bypassed entirely, as though Wallace's voice is itself typing out the pages. Nevins's interest was in these pages rather than the sound recordings, which were a convenient means to an end, and were for the most part un-archived.<sup>2</sup>

This conception of the recordings primarily as written texts – as the transcriptions – is also apparent in how Nevins refers to the interviews as 'memoirs'. In its etymological link to writing, the term 'memoir' is comparable to 'autobiography' (*graphia* signifying 'writing' in Greek). Derived from the Middle French *memoire*, it refers to a 'written account', and the terms are somewhat interchangeable; as '[r]ecords of events

written from personal knowledge or experience of the writer', memoirs are also defined as '[a]utobiographical observations'.<sup>3</sup> The terms also have distinct cultural connotations, however, variously addressed by literary critics and theorists. The memoir is said to be a historical resource with less literary pretensions than the autobiography, for instance.<sup>4</sup> In their purpose as contributions to a historical archive, the documents being collected by Nevins may in this sense be more appropriately termed memoirs than autobiographies, but he also seems to use these terms in a rather vague, interchangeable sense, as where he begins his section referring to an autobiographical tradition: 'All history depends on the great use of memoirs, autobiographies'.<sup>5</sup>

Nevins discusses the oral history memoirs in relation to an autobiographical canon that includes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), which Nevins claims 'comes close to pure invention', being 'one of the great works of fiction of that century'. In contrast, the documents being produced by his office apparently have more 'candor',<sup>6</sup> and in this sense could be seen as more memoir-like than literary. Oral history has the advantage, according to Nevins, of being conducted by interviewers who, if skilful, can probe and cross-examine, getting closer to the truth. Oral historians are now as interested in subjectivity, in experience and memory, as in factual information about public lives; but at this point, Nevins envisaged his interviews as filling out the documentary gaps in a historical archive.

The importance of oral memoirs as written historical documents is also indicated by his earlier publication *The Gateway to History* (1938), the preface to which put forward the idea of an organisation such as that he later founded at Columbia. In order to enliven historical study, he proposed that what was required was 'some organization which made a systematic attempt to obtain, from the lips and papers of living Americans who have led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic, and cultural life of the last sixty years.' Nevins's focus from the outset was on Americans who had led 'significant lives', and who already produced written documents ('papers'), but with whom interviews could help to fill in the documentary gaps. A little later in the same paragraph, Nevins elaborates:

We have agencies aplenty to seek out the papers of men long dead. But we have only the most scattered and haphazard agencies for obtaining a little of the immense mass of information about the more recent American past – the past of the last half century – which might come fresh and direct from men once prominent in politics, in business, in the professions, and in other fields.<sup>7</sup>

For Nevins, then, oral memoirs could extend a written autobiographical tradition in new, improved ways, making an 'immense mass of information' available for the first time, which can come 'fresh and direct' from 'significant' men, and which through the facilita-

tion of a skilled interviewer can provide a more accurate as well as a fuller account of the past. What is innovative is the fact that these memoirs are based on oral history interviews, but as well as the oral element of the recordings being immediately transformed into written texts, like traditional autobiographies they are restricted to a privileged elite.

After the mid-twentieth century, tape recorders provided one of the tools to help challenge the 'great men' tradition of autobiography. As many critics and other commentators have observed, a relatively exclusive autobiographical canon opened out toward more democratic and varied forms of life writing, especially from the 1980s onwards, being transformed by black, working-class and feminist voices.<sup>8</sup> At this point, though, Nevins was using sound recording technologies to extend, rather than to challenge, the life writing tradition: to provide written memoirs from elite voices (from 'men once prominent in politics' and so on), to fill out the gaps in an existing written archive. And as well as the edited transcripts being themselves conceived of as somewhat autobiographical, Nevins used some of them to contribute to his biographies, which similarly focused on singular 'great men'.

It was indeed his biographical writing that led him to his interest in oral history in the first place. Louis Starr, who became Nevins's successor as director of the Oral History Research Office, in his essay 'Oral history' (1977) claims that it was when completing his biography of Grover Cleveland (twenty-second and twenty-fourth US president) in 1931 that Nevins first thought about the possibility of conducting interviews for the benefit of future scholars: 'he lamented that no one had had the wit to interview Cleveland or his associates'.<sup>9</sup> The language of the written tradition continues through Starr's essay, which refers interchangeably to 'oral history memoirs' and 'oral autobiographies that may run to a thousand or more pages'.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Starr also refers to the 'extensive Oral History memoir by Governor Lehman', which 'forms one of the principal sources' for Nevins's biography, *Herbert H Lehman and his Era* (1963).<sup>11</sup> Biographers have long made use of autobiographies as a source of information about their subjects, and Nevins built on this tradition in using his oral memoirs to gather more information than previously existing written sources could provide.

Nevins himself refers to the extensive use he made of the oral history interviews for his biographical writing in his Preface to *Ford: The Times, the Man, the Company* (1954), explaining that a 'vital part' of the archives that he found invaluable for this work was the oral history section. He goes on to again argue that oral history can greatly supplement previously available written documents: 'Readers of this volume will note how often these recollections have imparted life and meaning to the skeletal materials furnished by correspondence and account books'.<sup>12</sup> This book's focus on a single prominent man, albeit in the wider context of the Ford Motor Company and to some extent the automobile industry, is typical of how the biographical tradi-

tion resembles the autobiographical in its selection of elite figures on which to focus. As Liz Stanley has pointed out, both autobiographies and biographies have certain generic commonalities, including that most of them are concerned with “great lives”, and these are almost invariably those of white middle and upper class men.<sup>13</sup> David J Mitchell also discusses this biographical tendency, and observes how oral history has moved away from an elitist approach:

Biography, of course, lends itself to the study of the lives of prominent persons who are believed to have influenced the course of history or at least played important roles on the historical stage. Some oral history projects have similarly devoted themselves to the study and collection of reminiscences of well-known personalities. However, generally speaking, one of the innovative marks oral history has made on the study of the past is that it encourages and promotes a non-elitist approach to history.<sup>14</sup>

By the time Starr published ‘Oral history’ in 1977, he was also able to move beyond the focus at Columbia on prominent individuals. As the first example of published oral history, the essay refers to Theodore Rosengarten’s account of the life of the illiterate black sharecropper, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, much as Mitchell goes on to do in his essay to illustrate how oral history promotes a non-elitist approach. These essays are indicative of how oral history increasingly moved away from the canonical autobiographical and biographical tradition of authorship by privileged, elite individuals. Rather than supplementing the written documents already produced by such individuals, as Nevins aimed to do, works such as Rosengarten/Shaw’s could give literary ‘voice’ to the illiterate. There is also a written tradition of slave narratives, however, of which *All God’s Dangers* could be considered a modern oral-literary descendent.

### **Black literary voices**

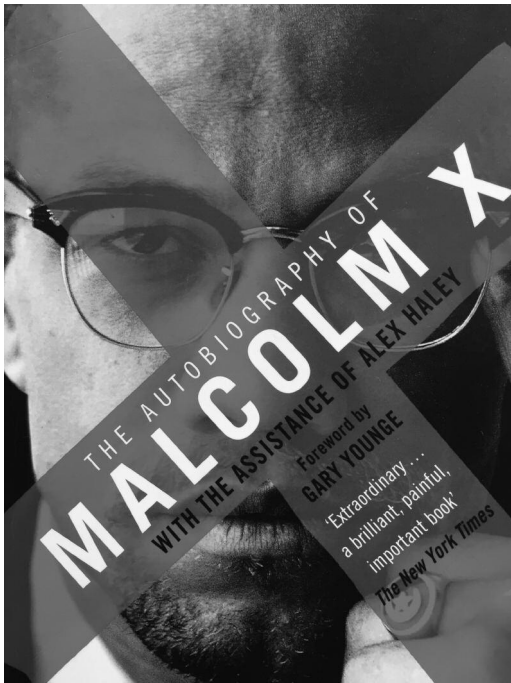
Nevins was among the first oral historians to use a tape recorder, but there were of course antecedents, which Starr traces back to the Federal Writers Project (FWP) in the 1930s (as have many oral historians ever since). Hiring unemployed writers to document the lives of ordinary people, including people who had been enslaved, these ‘manually recorded interviews’, as Starr puts it (using ‘pencil and pad’, as his predecessor put it), ‘were largely forgotten in the National Archives until interest in Black studies combined with the oral history movement to resuscitate them decades later.’<sup>15</sup>

A tradition of slave narratives can be traced back further, to when early twentieth century historians engaged in research to help show that slavery was far from benevolent. As Donald A Ritchie reports in his *Doing Oral History*, Frederic Bancroft travelled through the South, recording recollections of slavery from freedmen and their former masters in his diaries; Harrison Trexler conducted similar research in Missouri; and

other historians at black colleges in the South started interviewing former slaves.<sup>16</sup> In providing first-hand accounts of slave experiences in opposition to dominant racist narratives, such precursors of oral history are comparable with an earlier, written tradition, that had flourished during the antebellum period, when autobiographical accounts of slave experiences were widely published and promoted by abolitionist supporters.<sup>17</sup> Historical accounts of slave narratives in this earlier period tend to refer to Frederick Douglass’s acclaimed nineteenth century autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845), which was influential in its support of abolition, and is now often considered a literary classic.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin Botkin, national folklore editor of the Federal Writers Project (1938-1939), wrote that the best slave narratives ‘belong to literature’, making ‘valuable contributions to American literature in the form of personal memoirs’.<sup>19</sup> While narratives such as Douglass’s have become ‘classics’, Botkin’s introduction to this collection of narratives extracted from the FWP interviews, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (1945), contrasts how ‘the oral statements of ex-slaves may seem crude and casual’. He defends the oral narratives, however, as ‘possessing literary qualities of their own, close to folk literature’. He is keen to convey how the written versions of these narratives retain a certain orality, which is what helps to give them special literary qualities: ‘They have the forthrightness, tang, and tone of people talking, the immediacy and concreteness of the participant and the eyewitness, and the salty irony and mother wit which, like the gift of memory, are kept alive by the bookless world.’<sup>20</sup> With his allusion to the oral traditions of a largely non-literate culture, Botkin was evidently more interested in preserving the oral quality of the narratives when written down than Nevins, who was primarily concerned with supplementing written documents with more written documents.

Oral history in the USA was primarily an archival practice – filling in the gaps of existing archives as in the Columbia collections – until at least the 1960s when history was affected by the ‘New Left’ and increasingly scrutinised by activists, including those involved in the black struggle for civil rights and the expression of identity.<sup>21</sup> As Starr has indicated, the FWP narratives were resuscitated around this time, when some conflict began to emerge between those who wanted to focus on influential people and those more interested in giving voice to the disempowered.<sup>22</sup> The FWP narratives, along with autobiographical works such as those by Douglass, Malcolm X and Shaw, began to provide some foundation for the new interest in African American history and politics. The family history researcher Tamara Hareven, for example, notes that both *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Alex Haley’s own generational history, *Roots* (1976), fulfilled public functions in helping to forge a positive and historic identity for black Americans.<sup>23</sup>



In presenting a collection of first-person narrative extracts from across a range of the FWP interviews, however, Botkin moves away from the autobiographical and biographical traditions in so far as these focus on the singular 'significant' person. Collections such as *Lay My Burden Down*, drawing on the FWP collection of over 2,000 slave narratives, are distinct from a black autobiographical tradition that spans from Douglass through to Malcolm X and Nate Shaw (real name Ned Cobb), as well as, more obviously, from the memoirs and biographies produced by Nevins.<sup>24</sup> James Olney describes how black studies courses have been organised around this autobiographical tradition, around which critical literature has flourished, in part because 'black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than in standard histories and because black writers entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography.'<sup>25</sup> Douglass and Malcolm X are thus 'firmly established authors', writes Olney, whose works are studied in English departments rather than necessarily departments of history or social science. Critics have found Malcolm X's story to follow the autobiographical paradigm of the traditional 'conversion narrative', for instance, the structure of which Carol Ohmann links to American classics such as Benjamin Franklin's autobiography.<sup>26</sup>

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* clearly belongs to a literary life writing tradition, then, not least in being narrated by a singular male subject, as is Shaw's *All God's Dangers*. Early African American autobiographies and oral histories tended to exclude women, much as women were excluded in the white 'great men' tradition.<sup>27</sup> However, *The Autobiography* and *All God's Dangers* can also be distinguished from the autobio-

graphical tradition in so far as it is a written tradition; in contrast to Douglass's autobiography, Malcolm X and Shaw in the first instance narrated their life stories orally, and this essay will later consider how Shaw's narrative, at least, attempts to preserve something of that orality. They can also be distinguished from Nevins's oral memoirs in that they diverge from the elitist element of the 'great men' tradition; in contrast to Nevins's narrators, Malcolm X was not a member of the privileged white elite, despite becoming a widely influential political figure, and Shaw was an illiterate sharecropper who created a tenant farmers' union. Both came from poor backgrounds, lacked formal education and lived through severe struggles, and were thus unlikely to leave extensive written documents or to compose for themselves a written autobiography without the assistance of a writer to shape their oral narratives. As Gary Young puts it in his introduction to *The Autobiography*, Malcolm X's journey is one 'we rarely hear about because those who live in the ghetto almost by definition never get to tell their own stories'.<sup>28</sup> Malcolm X's and Shaw's narratives thus involve some level of explicit intervention from an interviewer-writer.

Although critics have discussed the autobiographical qualities of such works, then, they may also be considered somewhat biographical. Malcolm X's and Shaw's interviewers, Haley and Rosengarten, approach these subjects as biographers in seeking to write, or at least to elicit and to facilitate the narration of, somebody else's life story. In contrast, Nevins's activities to some extent preserved the distinction between the autobiographical and biographical, the oral memoirs being transcriptions of the spoken words of the interviewees, who are therefore considered the authors of their first-person narratives, and the biographies being authored by Nevins, who drew on the memoirs among other sources to document another person's life in the third person.

The autobiographical sense of the oral memoirs being narrated solely in the first person was heightened by Nevins's instructions to erase interviewers' questions, and to allow the narrators to edit their own transcripts, helping further to separate these out from any ambiguous relationship with the biographical. There is no way of splitting auto/biography entirely, however; to see the oral memoirs as purely autobiographical would be to deny the role of the interviewer, transcriber and co-editor who to varying degrees helps to create the narrative, however minimally and discreetly. As we have seen, Nevins did consider the interviewers' questions as crucial in the creation of an apparently more *truthful* narrative. The oral memoirs go some way to introducing a new kind of auto/biographical framework, in other words, which *The Autobiography* and *All God's Dangers* take further, not least in making the role of the interviewer explicit in their respective epilogue and preface, as the next section will discuss.

The merging of the autobiographical and biographical also seems evident in critical commentary such as the following by Hareven, who refers to *The Autobi-*



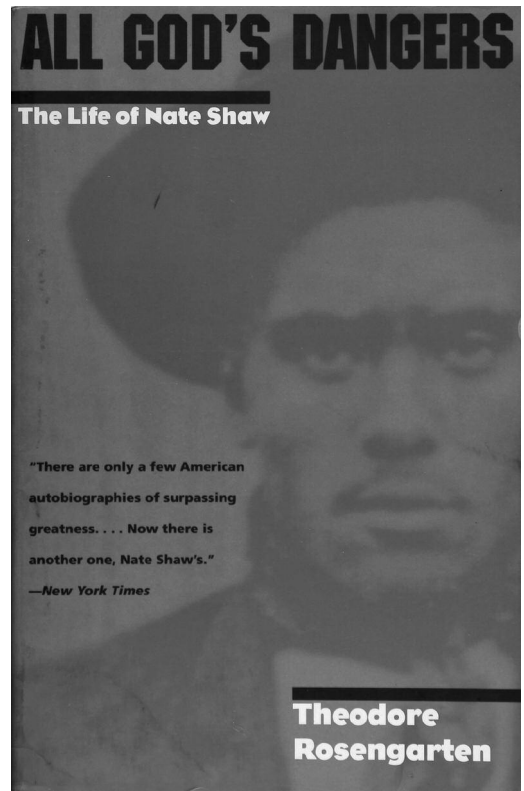
ography as a biography while comparing it to another autobiographical classic: 'In Malcolm X's biography, as in the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, the entire life sequence leading to the moment of conversion is viewed as providential.'<sup>29</sup> Hareven's reference here to 'Malcolm X's biography', which closely follows two references to its title as 'the *Autobiography*', points toward the co-created, ambiguous quality of such works.

### Auto/biographical narratives

Literary scholars have generally done little to get beyond the traditional idea of the self-created, written autobiography by considering collaborative relationships, which Malcolm A Sanders sees as a particular limitation for scholars of African American autobiography. Sanders observes that critics have remained fixated on theories defined by traditions and categorisations that ignore the distinctive intricacies of the 'dictated autobiography'; such works are 'transformed to read as self-created texts'.<sup>30</sup> Thus, while Hareven hints at the possibility of categorising *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as either autobiographical or biographical, literary critics such as Olney seem to follow the lead of the title, referring to it as an autobiography authored by Malcolm X rather than being based on oral interviews with Haley as co-creator. Philippe Lejeune's understanding of autobiography more generally as 'collaborative', considering the different roles of the oral narrator and the structuring writer, is an unusual exception among the more traditional literary categorisations.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, oral historians have made much of the relationship between the interviewer and narrator, and how this helps to shape the resulting narratives.<sup>32</sup> Such discussions have taken particular angles in black oral history. Advocates have viewed the interviewer-author as a facilitator who can help give voice to groups whose lives had been shaped by 'colonised history' written from an outsider standpoint, as Gary Y Okihiro has argued in 'Oral history and the writing of ethnic history' (1981), but it is clear that such a role requires caution and sensitivity. Okihiro discusses how an interview involves the different worldviews of the oral historian and narrator, which can be particularly important in cross-cultural situations, leading potentially to misunderstandings, distortions and incomplete pictures of the subjects being studied.<sup>33</sup>

Okihiro thus argues that the document that is the end product of the interview is neither an autobiography nor a biography, but is best conceptualised rather as a 'conversational narrative', being 'a dialogue between interviewer and interviewee' with their different worldviews. *The Autobiography* is 'not an autobiography; rather it is the mutual creation of two men, Malcolm X and Alex Haley'.<sup>34</sup> Questions around authorship have since been discussed much more generally by oral historians, perhaps most influentially by Michael Frisch in *A Shared Authority* (1990). As the title indicates, Frisch argues that oral historians should



seek to understand how the authorship of an oral history narrative is shared between the 'historian posing questions and editing the results' and the 'subject', whose words are the heart of the consequent texts'.<sup>35</sup> Alistair Thomson observes how black and ethnic community oral histories have continued to raise concerns, which are widely shared by politically-committed oral historians, about the roles of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', seeking to find ways in which researchers and community members can 'contribute their different expertise and have a "shared authority" in the processes and products of historical work'.<sup>36</sup>

The rest of this essay will consider how both *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *All God's Dangers* are co-created works, differing from the self-created autobiography of literary tradition. Both texts resist any firm categorisation as either autobiographical or biographical. The first edition of *The Autobiography* makes no reference to Haley on the cover, presenting it most obviously as the self-created autobiography of the man whose photograph is central (Grove Press 1965), but later editions move away from the model of the autobiography toward a more biographical context, presenting the narrative 'as told to Alex Haley' (Ballantine Books 1987; 1989) and 'with the assistance of Alex Haley' (Penguin Books 1968; 2007). This move toward making Haley more prominent is paralleled in the way the epilogue, where Haley describes his role in shaping the narrative, becomes the foreword (in the Penguin edition). On reading the epilogue/foreword, it becomes

evident that Haley had a major influence on the narrative, and that it may not, after all, be in a straightforward sense autobiographical. The title of Shaw/Rosengarten's narrative, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, seems less leading as it does not designate the book as an autobiography, and in naming Rosengarten as the author the cover points toward the likelihood of a biography; but the first sentence of the preface then immediately seems to classify the book as an autobiography: 'This big book is the autobiography of an illiterate man'.<sup>37</sup> By presenting it as an illiterate man's 'autobiography', Rosengarten further encourages the reader to query the category, and the preface goes on to describe his approach to recording Shaw's story, in a comparable way to Haley's epilogue/foreword.

In both texts, the role of the interviewer is explicated in some detail, framing the main narrative, as Haley and Rosengarten each write a paratext which describes their encounters and relationship with their subjects and their role in eliciting and editing the life story. Haley sets out his background as a writer and how an early interview with Malcolm X for *Playboy* resulted in being invited to write his full 'autobiography'; Rosengarten introduces his role as a student helping to investigate a defunct Sharecropper's Union, and how a single interview with Shaw as a surviving member led to his proposal to record Shaw's life. In so far as they both undertake an interview, which leads them to elicit and facilitate the telling of their subject's life stories, Haley's and Rosengarten's projects are from the outset comparable. Both writers are to some degree acting as biographers, approaching their subjects in order to narrate their life stories.

Mitchell's essay begins from this premise, but observes that oral history also makes biography more like autobiography. The use of oral history by biographers helps 'to transform their art by blending and weaving it closely with autobiographical forms', allowing 'a biographer to tell the story of a life in the words of the person who lived it, or of those whose paths it crossed'.<sup>38</sup> While Mitchell's discussion relates to Rosengarten's 'biography', Haley himself similarly writes of this process in another essay, 'Black history, oral history, and genealogy' (1973), where he describes the early stage of his editing. Having spent the first year taking notes, Haley reports spending a second year arranging them and, 'as if Malcolm, writing in the first person, putting onto paper, and with all the rewrites and the drafts, what hopefully would sound to a reader as if Malcolm X had just sat down and told that reader, from his memory, from earliest memory to the time he was talking'.<sup>39</sup>

Rosengarten, though, seems more aware of what is lost in the process of transforming Shaw's oral narrative into written words. Following their first meeting, Rosengarten describes how he and his friend felt something was 'slipping out of our grasp'; although they could remember details of Shaw's stories, 'no reconstruction could capture the power of his performance'.<sup>40</sup> In his discussion of how he edited the stories,

Rosengarten describes 'a hazardous selection process', sometimes having to choose from multiple versions of the same story, for example, or leaving out stories that seemed remote from Shaw's personal development. He also explains how he arranged the stories chronologically:

My editing consisted of arranging Shaw's stories in a way that does justice both to their occurrence in time and his sequence of recollection. I tried, within the limits of a general chronology, to preserve the affinities between stories. For memory recalls kindred events and people and is not constrained by the calendar.<sup>41</sup>

Both writers subject the narratives to a comparable process of chronological organisation, one that accords with traditional forms of autobiographical and biographical narrative, typically beginning with childhood and ending with old age or at least close to the present. *The Autobiography* begins with an image of Malcolm X's pregnant mother, soon to give birth to the narrator; *All God's Dangers* begins with Shaw's stories of his father's family and his own childhood. Both narratives work through childhood to leaving home, to prison and political activities and finally to old age with some reflections on death. Haley, however, imagines how his editing process has created for his readers the sense that they are listening to Malcolm X telling his stories in chronological order, 'from earliest memory to the time he was talking', whereas Rosengarten is more explicit about how the oral narrative did not originally follow a chronology and seems more careful to 'preserve the affinities between stories' as remembered and narrated by Shaw.

### Rosengarten's tape recorder

Another aspect of Shaw's narrative that Rosengarten indicates is different from the written text, indeed is missing from it, 'lost [...] in the transformation of these oral stories to written literature', is Shaw's 'gestures, mimicries, and intonations – all the devices of his performance are lost'.<sup>42</sup> This awareness may be in part due to the fact that Rosengarten recorded his sessions with Shaw on a tape recorder, and worked from 'notes I had written while playing back the tapes'.<sup>43</sup> Haley's approach was different: he took notes in the first place. Although *The Autobiography* and *All God's Dangers* both differ from the self-created autobiography of literary tradition as explicitly co-created works, this final section will argue that Rosengarten's text moves furthest from the life writing tradition in its attention to and incorporation of orality.

Haley does not reveal his method of note-taking. In contrast to the 'oral memoirs' which from the 1950s onwards were based on transcriptions of sound recordings, it is not evident that Haley's notes included much of the language Malcolm X used, his exact words, phrasings or dialect. Although Nevins did not show any great interest in recording modes of speech such as



through to impact on his own children: 'We little colored children had to jump in the white man's field and work for what we could get, go choppin cotton, go to hoein; white folks' schools runnin right on and the white man's children goin to school while we workin in his field.'<sup>54</sup>

Malcolm X's education was limited but did enable him to read and write, and it was his avid reading in prison which, according to his *Autobiography*, became crucial to the development of his religious and political understandings and led to his eventual fame. He claims that it was because of his frustration at his limited ability to write letters that he began to educate himself through reading:

I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters [...] In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there – I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn't articulate, I wasn't even functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I would say it, something such as, 'Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad'.<sup>55</sup>

This is an unusual passage in *The Autobiography*, in its indication that it is quoting Malcolm X's words precisely as he would have spoken them. It makes clear the difference between spoken and written language (a difference that would have diminished, but not disappeared, as Malcolm X increasingly educated himself). To a greater extent than *All God's Dangers*, which does not distance itself from how its subject speaks (or spoke), the book as a whole opts to express Malcolm X's life story following the written conventions of spelling and grammar, and also of genre: of the form of autobiography (most obviously with its title, for example, and also its closer adherence to chronology).

As Shaw was unacquainted with writing, it seems most valuable to use the tape recorder to document his spoken words, to help enable their reproduction in print as far as possible on his own terms. Rosengarten gave more freedom to Shaw to respond to his questions as he chose, as well as doing more to preserve and reproduce his spoken narrative; whereas Haley had something of a battle with Malcolm X who, being able to read the manuscript, wanted editorial control. According to Rosengarten's preface, when he asked Shaw on their first meeting why he joined the union, he recounted a whole series of life experiences 'uninterrupted for eight hours', after which 'our question was unanswered'.<sup>56</sup> Shaw's illiteracy meant that he could not have editorial control over the manuscript in the same way as Malcolm X, but in ignoring or *interpreting* the question in a way that allows Shaw's narrative to not be determined by it, he seems to have taken some control over how he responded. Shaw's control over his narrative came *before* its written composition, in other words, whereas Malcolm X's could also come after. If Rosengarten gave freedom here in allowing Shaw to wander

far from the question, he was in turn relatively free to edit the narrative for publication, whereas Malcolm X's attempts to intervene in the editorial process contributed to tensions between himself and Haley.

From the opening page of the epilogue/foreword, Haley presents himself as a writer, which may indicate that his view of his role was of a more active, creative one than the role Rosengarten saw himself as performing. While Malcolm X wanted control over the manuscript, producing an agreement that 'nothing can be in this book's manuscript that I didn't say, and nothing can be left out that I want in it', Haley later, 'in a time of strain between us', sought permission to write his own comments about Malcolm X 'which would not be subject to his review'.<sup>57</sup> Although he is commissioned to write an autobiography, then, Haley's approach here seems biographical in moving away not only from what Malcolm X says and how he says it, but from what he might want Haley to write.

Haley also indicates that his progress was slow because Malcolm X's narrative was for a long time not what would fit into his concept of what he needed for an autobiography. He explains in the epilogue/foreword: 'my notebook contained almost nothing but Black Muslim philosophy, praise of Mr Muhammad, and the "evils" of "the white devil"'. He would bristle when I tried to urge him that the proposed book was *his* life.' Thus Haley's questioning is aimed at steering Malcolm X's narrative in an autobiographical direction, which apparently makes a breakthrough with the question 'I wonder if you'd tell me something about your mother?'

From his note-taking to his method of questioning, his editorial interventions and his own additional comments, then, Haley seems to take more active role than Rosengarten, who in contrast seems to give more authorial control to his subject in reportedly letting Shaw talk for hours without answering the question, reproducing his spoken language more closely, and making editorial decisions with some self-conscious awareness of a 'hazardous' process during which he attempts to preserve affinities between stories while also imposing a chronology. Another difference between Haley's and Rosengarten's interventions in the narratives is in the timing of their writing of the paratexts. Whereas Rosengarten wrote his preface before Shaw's death in 1973 (he dates the preface as October 1973; the brief epilogue states that Shaw died in November 1973), Haley writes of how it was on hearing of Malcolm X's death that he sat up all night writing the epilogue. Without denying that this death was hugely upsetting to Haley, a cynical analysis could interpret his death also as a release: he could now take narrative control through his own account of the creation of the text which Malcolm X would never have a chance to review or indeed read.

Overall, then, these two auto/biographical narratives differ in how they develop autobiographical conventions. Like Nevins's oral memoirs, *The Autobiography* and *All God's Dangers* conform to an older, established



autobiographical tradition in so far as they are written texts narrated by singular male leaders, but they also take part in the movement toward more democratic and varied kinds of life stories. They move away from a privileged white elite, and by making explicit the co-creation of the narratives, cutting across the distinctions between autobiography and biography, they query generic definitions. *All God's Dangers* goes furthest in 'giving voice' to its illiterate subject in printed form, not least in its incorporation of elements of the oral by using a tape recorder, preserving 'affinities between stories', conveying 'regional inflection and grammar', and acknowledging something of what gets lost in the transformation of voice into written words. Haley most actively intervenes in creating the narrative, initiating Malcolm X's move to focusing on the intimate details of his life, and battling with him for editorial control, while he also loses oral qualities of the interviews through the process of taking notes rather than using a tape recorder. In both cases, however, the very imposition of autobiographical form onto the oral narratives by the interviewer-writers – as co-creators – is part of the process of disrupting the literary convention of the self-created autobiography.

### Afterword

From the best-selling ghost-written memoirs of jazz musicians and baseball players to specialist oral history projects, collaborative auto/biographical narratives have flourished from the 1970s onwards. Published at a moment when all such narratives were about to start becoming more commonplace, *The Autobiography* seems to straddle the realm of oral history and more popular forms of autobiography. With a world-famous icon for its subject, *The Autobiography* paves the way for further narratives by well-known figures, the commercial success of which usually hangs on their singular fame but which are produced collaboratively with established writers, such as *Miles: The Autobiography* (Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe, 1989) and *Earl the Pearl: My Story* (Earl Monroe and Troupe, 2013). Its great influence on many African-Americans is evident in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* (1995), in which he describes 'Malcolm X's autobiography' as an inspiration in his personal and political life.<sup>59</sup> With its origins in interviews, *The Autobiography* can also be viewed as a precursor of modern oral history, and specifically of the many African American oral history projects which have flourished since the 1970s.<sup>60</sup> *All God's Dangers* may in contrast be viewed as more than a precursor, as providing an early example of such projects itself, in its use of sound recording to give voice to a relatively unknown figure.

In some respects, oral history has taken an increasingly distinctive trajectory, moving further from auto/biographical tradition in the increased use of multiple rather than singular voices, and more recently in the use of digital technology to make sound recordings of the interviews themselves widely accessible. While many projects typically aim to give voice to the

previously unheard, Leffler's *Black Leaders on Leadership* incorporates a wide range of leaders of variable renown, including 'artists, journalists, elected officials, businessmen, clergy, educators, lawyers, physicians, military officials, public policy makers, and leaders of voluntary organizations' (some of whom refer to Malcolm X, while few are of comparable fame themselves).<sup>61</sup> Leffler also refers to the 'Black Leadership' website where clips from the multiple interviews from which the book's extracts are drawn can be heard. Like Rosengarten, and most oral historians, Leffler is attuned to the difference between transcriptions and the audio recordings, as she explains:

The transcripts make every attempt to be true to the diction, grammar, and style of the speaker. But to fully appreciate the passion, emphasis, tone, gesture, and even silences, these interviews must be heard. This book is an analytic summary of what we can learn from these interviews. To fully appreciate each individual, we encourage readers to engage the website.<sup>62</sup>

Rosengarten's discussion of what goes missing in the transformation of the oral to written words indicates that he would similarly have wished to make the audio interviews accessible in some form.

As discussed above, there is also great awareness among oral historians of how the researcher or writer, and their relationship with the subject, shapes the narrative. Neither oral historians nor literary critics, however, have done much to apply such ideas to what Sanders terms the 'dictated autobiography'. Works such as *Miles: The Autobiography* tend to fall between two camps, being neither a straightforward autobiography nor an oral history. I would like to finish this essay by indicating how such works – taking *Miles* as a final, brief case study – can be viewed as at least closely related to oral history narratives, for which ideas from the field could be applied. *Miles* is framed by a paratext written by the collaborator, Troupe, who also attends closely to the sound of the voice.

Before interviewing Malcolm X, in 1962 Haley interviewed Miles Davis for the first of the *Playboy* interviews. In Davis's *Autobiography*, he claims that 'I didn't like what he did with the interview. Alex made up some things, although it was good reading [...] I didn't like that Alex dressed shit up. Alex is a good writer but he's very dramatic.'<sup>63</sup> As occurs in the epilogue/forward to Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, the emphasis here is on Haley as a writer. Like Malcolm X, Davis protests against Haley's editorial interventions, except that here the protest is not mediated by Haley himself. Over two decades later, in 1985, Troupe interviewed Davis for an article for *Spin* magazine. Much as Haley's interview developed into the relationship that led to the publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* a few years later, Troupe's interview led to *Miles: The Autobiography*. However, Troupe took a different approach to Haley, according to his afterword to *Miles*. In contrast

to Haley's interview, Miles received Troupe's 'favorably', and 'appreciated the approach I took. I simply let him speak for himself and expound, without interruption, on what he thought were the important facts of his life.'<sup>64</sup>

As with Rosengarten, it is likely that the tape recorder encouraged Troupe to convey Miles's own narrative more closely than would have been possible for Haley. Although he first took notes, 'After about three months [...] he relaxed with my taping him, even while we ate dinner or lunch together. These were the times when he revealed the most, told me all I needed to know.'<sup>65</sup> Troupe goes on to describe how he prioritised the preservation of Miles's own 'vulgar language' over any attempt to sanitise it to avoid offence. Further, referring to the sound of Miles's voice, Troupe indicates the importance of orality in a specifically African-American context:

Miles speaks in a tonal language, in the manner of mainland Africans and African-Americans from the South. By tonal language I mean that the same word can take on different meanings according to the pitch and tone, the way the word is spoken. For example, Miles can use *motherfucker* to compliment someone

or simply as punctuation. In any case, the voice you hear in the book is truly Miles and had I not accomplished that, I would have failed to do my job. It's his story, his book, and I didn't try to make it otherwise. Besides, when I hear Miles speak, I hear my father and many other African-American men of his generation. I grew up listening to them on street corners, in barbershops, ball parks and gymnasiums, and bucket-of-blood bars. It's a speaking style that I'm proud and grateful to have documented.'<sup>66</sup>

Troupe's claim to have captured Miles's *true* voice may be naive, in contrast to Rosengarten's awareness of what changes in the process of writing, but the attention to orality seems to place *Miles* closer in this respect to the concerns of oral history than Malcolm X's autobiography. That Troupe wrote an entire book about his relationship with Miles, *Miles and Me* (2000), indicates that this work among others is ripe for discussion. Troupe's focus on famous male figures does not challenge the 'great men' tradition as oral historians have since done; but as a musician, Davis would have been at least as aware of the importance of sound as the orator Malcolm X. The first word of *Miles* is a command: 'Listen'.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks go especially to Joanna Bornat and Alison Waller for helpful comments on this article.

## NOTES

1. Allen Nevins, 'Oral history: how and why it was born', in David K Dunaway and Willa K Baum (eds), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, second edition, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996, pp 29-38 (31).

2. See, for example Columbia University Libraries Oral History Research Office's piece by Ronald J Grele on 'Notable New Yorkers', 'Practices of the Oral History Research Office': 'In the early days of the Office, only a small portion of audio was saved to give some indication of the voice of the interviewee. Thus there is only a 120-minute segment of the hundreds of hours of tape of the Perkins interview that yielded a more than 5,000-page transcript. In one other case, tapes are missing.' Accessed online at [www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nny/overview.html](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nny/overview.html), 7 September 2016. (All tapes have been kept since 1961).

3. 'Memoir', *Oxford English Dictionary*, third edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Accessed online at [www.oed.com/view/Entry/116334?redirectedFrom=memoir#eid](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/116334?redirectedFrom=memoir#eid) 26 May 2016.

4. See Laura Marcus in her discussion of the German philosopher Georg Misch's *Geschichte der Autobiographie* (first published in 1907), in *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, p 149. See also Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as defacement', *MLN: Comparative Literature*, vol 94, no 5, 1979, pp 919-930 (919).

5. Nevins, 1996, p 36.

6. Nevins, 1996, p 37.

7. Allen Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, Boston, New York: DC Heath, 1938, p iv.

8. See, for example, Marcus, 1994, p 1; Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*, London: Sage, 2001; Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (eds), *Narrative and Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 1998, pp 4-6.

9. Louis Starr, 'Oral history', in Dunaway and Baum, 1996, pp 39-61 (44).

10. Starr, 1996, p 40.

11. Elizabeth B Mason and Louis M Starr, *The Oral History Collection of Columbia University*, New York: Oral History Research Office, 1979, p xii.

12. Allen Nevins, *Ford: The Times, the Man, the Company*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954, p viii.

13. Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992, p 4.

14. Mitchell, 'Living documents': oral history and biography', *Biography*, vol 3, 1980, pp 283-296 (293).

15. Starr, 1996, p 43.

16. Donald A Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, Kindle edition.

17. For commentary, see Norman R Yetman, 'An introduction to the WPA slave narratives' [web page]. Accessed online at <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro02.html> and <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro04.html>, 2 August 2016.

18. For further discussion of Douglass in connection with the later oral histories see, for example, Albert S Broussard, 'Race and oral history', in Donald A Ritchie (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, Kindle edition.

19. Benjamin Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945, p xiii. The second quotation here is from Botkins's own quotation from Vernon Loggins's *The Negro Author*.

20. Botkin, 1945, p xiii.

21. Life histories from the 'bottom up' had previously waned, partly under the influence of quantitative methods in sociology, as Ronald Grele has commented, and interviewing only took

on a renewed presence in history with the collection of oral histories at universities, most notably of the memoirs at Columbia from 'movers and shakers' to fill the gaps in existing archival or manuscript holdings, 'Directions for oral history in the United States', in Dunaway and Baum, 1996, pp 62-84 (64-65).

**22.** See Grele, 1996, pp 64-67.

**23.** Tamara Hareven, 'The search for generational memory', in Dunaway and Baum, 1996, pp 241-256.

**24.** There are many other such collections, for example *Voices from Slavery* (1970), as outlined by Yetman, 'An introduction to the WPA narratives: making the collection known' [web page].

**25.** James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, p 15.

**26.** Carol Ohman, 'The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A revolutionary use of the Franklin tradition', *American Quarterly*, vol 22, 1970, pp 131-149.

**27.** In her discussion of how black women have adapted the African American autobiography, Alison Easton notes that 'only thirteen of the 115 personal narratives by former slaves published in the USA between 1760 and 1920 were by women', 'Subjects-in-time: slavery and African-American women's autobiographies', in Tess Coslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Transformations: Feminism and Autobiography*, Florence, USA: Routledge, 2002, p 177. The two case studies examined here, by Malcolm X and Shaw, are representative of the focus on male figures in early oral histories. Many feminist oral history projects have since sought to recover African American women's voices, such as 'Voices of feminism' [web page]. Accessed online at [www.loc.gov/folklife/civilrights/survey/view\\_collection.php?coll\\_id=2150](http://www.loc.gov/folklife/civilrights/survey/view_collection.php?coll_id=2150), 19 October 2016.

**28.** Gary Younge, 'Introduction', *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, London and New York: Penguin, 2007, p 1.

**29.** Hareven, 1996, p 245.

**30.** Malcolm A Sanders, 'Theorizing the collaborative self: the dynamics of contour and context in the dictated autobiography', *New Literary History*, vol 25, 1994, pp 445-458 (445). Albert E Stone discusses instances of collaboration, including *Autobiography of Malcolm X and All God's Dangers*, in *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from*

*Henry Adams to Nate Shaw*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. However, as Sanders points out, his criteria for success is the degree to which the speakers dominate the narrative; he does not consider how Rosengarten or Haley may determine the text through the forms they choose (Sanders, 1994, p 457). My interest will also be in their methods of interviewing, recording and editing.

**31.** See Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. The other exception is Paul Eakin, who questions the tendency of other critics to place Malcolm X's life story in the autobiographical tradition, and considers that Haley's interventions help to avoid a traditional autobiographical fiction. Eakin argues that Haley as an active 'collaborator' confirms the uncertainty and flexibility of Malcolm X, his account of the composition showing that 'the fiction of the autobiographer as a man with a "completed sense of his own life"' is especially misleading in the case of Malcolm X. Eakin argues that Haley's contribution to the shape of the *Autobiography* was 'more extensive and fundamental than his narrowly literary concerns with foreshadowing and suspense might seem to suggest'; that Haley was instrumental in playing out the drama between Malcolm X's conflicting identities and in helping to move toward a view of his story as a life of changes rather than as having a definitive shape of completeness, in 'Malcolm X and the limits of autobiography', *Criticism*, vol 18, 1976, pp 230-242.

**32.** As part of her influential discussion of how oral historians since the 1980s have become aware of how the interaction between interviewer and narrator impacts on the interview, its content and interpretation, Valerie Yow refers to Rosengarten's admission that Ned Cobb (Nate Shaw's real name) is his 'hero', and his understanding of the need for an accurate description of the relationship despite fears that this discredits objectivity in social science inquiry, in "'Do I like them too much?": effects of the oral history interview on the interviewer and vice-versa', reprinted in Perks and Thomson, 2006, pp 56-57.

**33.** Gary Y Okihiro, 'Oral history and the writing of ethnic history', in Dunaway and Baum, 1996, pp 199-214, (199, 201). For further discussions of the limitations of written colonial archives

and challenges involved in cross-cultural oral history projects see, for example, Andrew F Clark, 'The challenges of cross-cultural oral history: collecting and presenting Pulaar traditions on slavery from Bundu, Senegambia (West Africa)', *Oral History Review*, vol 20, 1992, pp 1-21.

**34.** Okihiro, 1996, p 207.

**35.** Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, p xx.

**36.** Alistair Thomson, 'Moving stories: oral history and migration studies', *Oral History*, vol 27, no 1, 1999, pp 24-37 (33). See also Laurie R Serikaku for discussion of the benefits of narrators in ethnic minority projects participating in the production and consumption of oral history projects (an early articulation of 'shared authority', while not precisely using these terms), 'Oral history in ethnic communities: widening the focus', *Oral History Review*, vol 17, 1989, pp 71-87.

**37.** Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974, p xiii.

**38.** Mitchell, 1980, p 295.

**39.** Alex Haley, 'Black history, oral history, and genealogy', in Perks and Thomson, 2015.

**40.** Rosengarten, 1974, p xv.

**41.** Rosengarten, 1974, p xxiv.

**42.** Rosengarten, 1974, p xxiv.

**43.** Rosengarten, 1974, p xx.

**44.** Rosengarten, 1974, p xxiv.

**45.** Rosengarten, 1974, p 3.

**46.** Rosengarten, 1974, p 239.

**47.** See above, endnote 20. Botkins's concerns seem to reflect the WPA director John Lomax's concerns with recording the interviews 'verbatim', although in fact the quality of note-taking and amount of editing varied considerably, as reported by Yetman in 'An introduction to the WPA slave narratives': 'John Lomax's leadership and the issue of race' and 'The limitations of the slave narrative collection: problems of memory' [web pages]. Accessed online at <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro10.html> and <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro14.html>, 5 August 2016.

**48.** Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, London and New York: Penguin, 2007, p 225.

**49.** See, for example, Adetayo Alabi, who discusses the background of black

autobiography in oral traditions in

*Telling Our Stories: Continuities and Divergences in Black Autobiographies*, New York: Palgrave, 2005.

50. Phyllis Leffler, *Black Leaders on Leadership*, New York: Palgrave, 2014, p 4.

51. Malcolm X, 2007, p 79.

52. Norman R Yetman (ed), *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives*, New York: Dover, 2000, p xi. (First published in 1970).

53. On the denial of literacy to slaves see, for example, Broussard, 2011. For more on literacy and education after slavery see Leffler, 2014, pp 72-73.

54. Rosengarten, 1974, pp 24-25.

55. Malcolm X, 2007, p 265.

56. Rosengarten, 1974, pp xiv-xv.

57. Malcolm X, 2007, pp 14-15.

58. Malcolm X, 2007, p 17.

59. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Edinburgh, London, New York and Melbourne: Canongate, 1995, Kindle edition.

60. For two excellent examples among the more recent publications in the field, which include discussion of the dynamics of interviewing, see Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change*, New York: Palgrave, 2006;

Leslie Brown and Anne Valk, *Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South*, New York: Palgrave, 2010.

61. Leffler, 2014, p 6.

62. Leffler, 2014, p 8.

63. Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005, pp 260-261.

64. Quincy Troupe, 'Afterword' to *Miles*, 2005, p 413.

65. Troupe, 2005, p 414.

66. Troupe, 2005, pp 414-415.

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